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UNCLAS TEGUCIGALPA 001612

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: INVISIBLE WOMEN: FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN HONDURAN  
POLITICS LAGS DESPITE QUOTAS

REF: 04 TEGUCIGALPA 1067

1. In light of the lack of significant numbers of women participating in Honduran politics as candidates, the country adopted several electoral laws to encourage and facilitate women's participation in the electoral process. The 2000 Law of Gender Equality mandated that 30 percent of all candidates nominated for public office by recognized political parties be women, something supplemented by the 2004 Electoral Law mandating a quota of no less than 30 percent participation by female candidates on ballots for congress and mayors/city councils.

2. These laws have not had the effects their proponents envisioned due to a failure to detail which positions will be included in that 30 percent minimum, meaning that many women are alternates and not main candidates for office. At the end of 2004, there were only 10 congresswomen (and 12 female alternates) in the 128-seat legislature. The dominant traditional parties of Honduras, the National and Liberal Parties, were unable to surpass the national quota of 30 percent in February's primary elections. In fact, the National Party was right at 30 percent, while the Liberal Party fell short of the minimum by 1 percent.

3. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of women's suffrage in Honduras. Over these fifty years, there has been only a slight increase in the number of women elected or appointed to top political positions in Honduras (reftel). Two of the major factors critics give for the lack of female participation are discrimination and anonymity. Political discrimination means women are less likely to receive sponsorship from party "bigwigs" to carry out campaigns. It is more difficult for women in politics to receive donations and contributions than their male counterparts. Thus, it is harder to gain publicity and move out of the shadow of anonymity. The women who have made it in the political sphere are those with money, connections, and already recognized public personas. There are other women who do not have the public recognition, but who have vowed to fight to ensure that Honduran women have a voice in politics.

4. Comment: Legally mandated quotas are unlikely to greatly increase women's participation in Honduran politics. Only when female political activists and candidates demand a larger role in the electoral process and when female voters support them in large numbers (anecdotal reports indicate that many female primary voters split their tickets among women candidates on different slates) will significant advancement by women candidates be achieved. In the words of Liberal Party female activist, Luz Ernestina Mejia, "Women must make a space for themselves within the established parties and their movements." End Comment.  
Tuebner